

## **Student Perceptions of the Speaking and Listening Component of FER**

Lindsay Wells, Asia University

### **Abstract**

Freshman English Repeaters (FER) is designed for students who failed one or more semesters of Asia University's yearlong Freshman English (FE) course. For a variety of reasons, FER students tend to wait until the end of the semester to complete their work, creating a stressful situation for both themselves and their instructors. This is especially problematic in the Speaking and Listening component of the course. CELE faculty have debated amongst themselves for some time as to the best ways to tackle this recurring issue. To date, however, there has been no organized effort to collect students' views on the logistics of FER. This paper attempts to partially fill that gap, with a focus on the Speaking and Listening component of the class. To measure student attitudes, a 45-question survey in English and Japanese was distributed to students taking FER at the time. The results indicate that although students display an overall neutral posture towards FER, their attitudes towards several specific aspects of the course are marked. The paper concludes with a number of considerations for future modifications of and research into the FER program.

### **Introduction**

All first-year students at Asia University are required to take Freshman English (FE). For Business Administration (BA), Business Hospitality (BH), Law and Economics Majors, this consists of a 45-minute class meeting five days per week. One of the major goals of the course is to help students grow in their communicative competence in the English language (Morrison and Paullin, 1997, p. 130).

International Relations (IR) students take a different version of FE that meets for only two 45-minute class sessions per week. In their first semester, International Relations students spend 50% of their class time focusing on the TOEIC and 50% on communicative English skills. In their second semester, the focus turns to learning International Relations content through English.

All FE classes have strict attendance policies, and students who are absent or late for class too many times automatically fail the course. Students can also fail by receiving

an overall grade of less than 60% in the course. Sometimes this occurs because a student simply doesn't perform well academically. However, attendance and participation typically represent a large percentage of the overall FE grade, and so tardiness and absenteeism often contribute. Whether for poor attendance, poor grades, or a mix of both, a sizeable number of students fail FE each semester and need to make up the credit before they can graduate.

At the time of publication of this article, students who need to make up the Freshman English credit do so by completing a course called Freshman English Repeaters, or FER. This course has been a source of concern for English teachers at Asia University for a number of years. One half of the course in particular, the Speaking and Listening component, has been a recurring topic of discussion, with some teachers expressing discontent with both the content and the organization of the course. Missing from such debates, however, are the students' voices. With the exception of Hull's (2012) review of the program as a whole, there has been no organized examination of students' perceptions of the Speaking and Listening portion of FER to date. This paper seeks to fill that gap by exploring how students see the administration and content of that component of the course.

### **Content and Administration of FER Classes**

Before the current FER system was in place, students who failed Freshman English were placed into mixed-level classes and essentially did the exact same course again. This proved so frustrating to teachers that two CELE faculty members, Stevenson and Hilderbrandt (1999), conceived of an alternate course. This new course was split into two halves, and based on self-study. This concept was more formally articulated by Park and Weaver in 2002, and further refined by Ridge and Weaver in 2004 and again by Jones and Lam in 2005.

The current FER course is split into two components: "Speaking and Listening", and "Reading and Writing". Each component meets during two 45-minute class periods per week and has its own teacher. The course itself consists mostly of independent work for which students earn points. A student passes the course when he or she has earned enough points in both halves of the course (60 for Reading and Writing, and 14 for

Speaking and Listening). Students who earn enough points in one component but not the other fail the entire course and must take it again. The course lasts for one semester, and counts for one semester of FE credit. The number of the course, I or II, indicates whether it counts for the first (I) or the second (II) semester of FE. Students who failed both semesters of FE must pass FER I and FER II. Because of the differences in their curriculum, IR students may only take FER I.

Students earn points in Reading and Writing by completing vocabulary, reading, and writing worksheets. In Speaking and Listening, students earn points primarily by watching movies in English, completing an accompanying worksheet, and then having a conversation about the movie with the instructor. Each movie conversation is worth two points, so students must complete a minimum of seven conversations to pass. Currently, students can earn extra points by attending English hour, which is a chat-time activity run by CELE faculty that is open to any students who wish to practice their English skills in a more relaxed atmosphere. FER students earn one point per English Hour session they attend, provided that they arrive on time and stay for the entire session. Most FER students forgo English Hour, opting to fulfill their point requirement with the movie conversations alone.

This point-based system means that students must only come to class enough times to complete the required work. For Reading and Writing, students work by themselves and at their own pace, and have little interaction with the instructor. The only factor limiting the number of students who can participate in a given class session is the number of worksheets available. In Speaking and Listening, students come whenever they have completed a movie worksheet and are ready to have a movie conversation. Since the recommended length of each conversation is five to eight minutes, and there are only 45 minutes per session, it is only realistic for a teacher to conduct between five and eight conversations per class period. Unlike in Reading and Writing, then, only a small number of students can participate in a given Speaking and Listening session.

While this point system is convenient for the students in many ways, it does present some problems. First, the system could be confusing, making it difficult for students to understand the rules and expectations of the course. Similarly, some teachers have worried that the handouts provided to students at the beginning of the year are

overly complicated. As Bailey (2013, pp. 45-46) and Song and Schwartz (2008, pp. 986-987) point out, more clearly and simply presented information is easier to process, and so unnecessary clutter could negatively affect students' perception of the material. In response to this concern, a group of teachers created new handouts for Fall 2013 that were designed to be more clear and streamlined. The new handout for Speaking in Listening is located in Appendix C of this paper. The old handouts are located in Appendices A and B.

Second, teachers have noticed a tendency for students to wait until the end of the semester to begin their work. As was mentioned already, the Speaking and Listening teacher can only have conversations with so many students in a given class period. This can result in a figurative pile-up of students at the end of the semester all hoping to complete their conversations in time to pass. This creates a stressful situation for the teacher and students alike, as students worry about being able to complete their work, and teachers feel pressure from students to squeeze them in to an increasingly tight schedule.

To prevent this, teachers typically remind students a number of times that they must pass both sections of the course, and that those who wait until the end of the semester to do their work risk not passing. In addition, some but not all teachers create conversation schedules for their students, requiring them to come to class on specific days, and sometimes even at specific times. While some teachers feel that this gives the students structure and provides a layer of accountability, others find scheduling to be an unnecessary hassle and complain that students tend to disregard the set days and times. There is no universal scheduling policy, so instructors are free to create and distribute schedules as they see fit.

One large problem with such internal debates is that they fail to take into account the perspective of the students. For example, Hull (2012) suspected that students had been told that that FER was easier than FE and were therefore not bothering to try very hard to pass their FE classes. On the contrary, Hull found that while most students had been aware of FER during their Freshman year, they had actually heard little about it (p.26). This study aims to gather further insights into FER from a student's perspective, and focuses on the following questions:

1. What do students think of the FER Speaking and Listening work?
2. Are students able to understand the current course structure and orientation?
3. Would changes to the course structure and orientation help students to pass the course and finish their work more quickly?

### **Survey**

To address these questions, I created a 45-item survey consisting of five parts. Part 1 elicited background information about the students' previous performance in FE and FER. Part 2 asked about their current progress in the class. Part 3 dealt with students' feelings about the Speaking and Listening coursework in general. Part 4 addressed the scheduling of classes. Finally, Part 5 explored student impressions of the orientation to the Speaking and Listening class.

I utilized several types of questions in the survey. For Part 1 and Part 2, both selected response and open-ended questions were used. The remaining three parts consisted mostly of questions pertaining to student perceptions, feelings, and preferences. To measure these, I employed a seven-point Likert scale.

The survey was written in English and then translated into Japanese by CELE's Student Assistants. These are students who work part-time in the CELE office and are carefully selected for the job. Being top students, their English level is excellent, and they frequently help with translation projects. Participants were free to answer open-ended questions in Japanese or English, and indeed several students wrote answers in Japanese. A native Japanese-speaking acquaintance assisted in interpreting such responses.

### **Administration of the Survey**

I contacted the designated FER instructors for the Fall 2013 semester and requested that they give the survey to their students. Instructors were asked to return all completed surveys by the end of the semester. The survey was to be anonymous, so no names were written on the questionnaires themselves, though consent forms were signed. I was not present for the distribution of a majority of the surveys, and did not specify that each survey be matched with its corresponding consent form when turned in. In hindsight, it would have been ideal to match the forms so as to allow for follow-up interviews, but the survey was detailed enough that numerous insights could be made from it nonetheless.

## Results

Of the 155 students registered for FER in Fall 2013, 71 took the survey, resulting in a response rate of 46%. These students represented all sections of FER offered during that semester. A breakdown of students by each Speaking and Listening teacher is presented in Table A. In some cases more than one class section was indicated, or the class section was otherwise unclear. If there was any doubt as to which class section the student actually belonged to, that response was categorized as “unclear”, and the student’s responses were not included in any analyses by class section. Their responses were included in all other analyses, however. To protect the anonymity of the teachers, real names are not used; instead, each teacher has been designated with a different letter of the alphabet.

**Table A: Part 1, Question 5 – Which FER class are you taking this semester?**

<b>FER Section</b>	<b>I-E</b>	<b>I-F</b>	<b>I-G</b>	<b>II-G</b>	<b>II-H</b>	<b>II-I</b>	<b>II-J</b>	<b>II-K</b>	<b>II-L</b>	<b>II-M</b>	<b>No Response</b>	<b>Unclear Response</b>
<b>Teacher</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>U</b>	<b>V</b>	<b>W</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>V</b>	<b>Z</b>	<b>Z</b>	<b>n/a</b>	<b>n/a</b>
<b>Number of Respondents</b>	6	3	6	11	11	7	3	2	5	7	7	3

### Part 1: Background Information

The purpose of this part was to collect basic demographic information about the participants. Questions 1 and 2 asked about students’ year in school and major, respectively. More than half of the students who responded were in their second year; the next largest group was third year students, followed by fourth year students. For majors, the three largest groups were from Economics (E), Law (L), and Business Administration (BA). International Relations (IR) and Business Hospitality (BH) students only made up a small minority within the sample group. Details may be found in Tables B and C. Hull (2012, p. 24) found similar representation in his sample group, which suggests that the respondents in this group reflect the overall FER population reasonably well.

**Table B: Part 1, Question 1 – Which year are you at Asia University?**

<b>Year at Asia University</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup></b>	<b>3<sup>rd</sup></b>	<b>4<sup>th</sup></b>
<b>Number of Respondents</b>	44	17	10

**Table C: Part 1, Question 2 – What is your major?**

<b>Major</b>	<b>BA</b>	<b>BH</b>	<b>IR</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>L</b>
<b>Number of Respondents</b>	16	3	2	22	28

There is no reference to Business Hospitality in Hull's results, however. This is because the BH program has a number of policies that differ from other majors at Asia University, one of which used to be that BH students were not allowed to take FER. While Hull was conducting his research, therefore, there would have been no BH students in FER. Hull also surveyed a larger number of IR students than are present in this study's sample. However, IR majors are only allowed to take FER classes for semester one; during the semester when the current survey was distributed, there were only 3 such classes. Simply put, there were fewer opportunities for IR students to take FER at the time, which probably explains the smaller number.

One other glaring difference between the findings of this survey and those of Hull pertains to students' FE levels. Unfortunately, few students in the present study could recall their FE class level. As a result, there is too little data for that question to be worth reporting.

Though students had largely forgotten their FE class name, all respondents were able to recall why they failed FE. For the majority of students, attendance was to blame. This differs somewhat from Hull (2012, p. 25). Although attendance was the number one reason cited for failure in Hull's study, he did report a larger number of students who failed because of a combination of attendance and poor grades. It is unclear why so few students cited grades as their reason for failing FE in the current survey, although it is possible that since less than half of FER students took the survey, the sample group

happened to contain an unusually high number of students who primarily failed FE because of attendance.

Responses to Questions 6-8 suggest that attendance continued to be a problem in FER for the current group. Of the 71 students surveyed, 22 stated that they had taken FER at least once before, and 14 reported that they had previously failed FER because of attendance. This is not uncommon, unfortunately. In fact, of the 155 students enrolled in FER for the Fall 2013 semester, 59 failed, resulting in a failure rate of 38%.

**Table D: Part 1, Question 4 – Why did you fail Freshman English?**

Attendance	Grades	Both
64	3	4

**Table E: Part 1, Question 6 – Have you taken FER before this semester?**

Yes	No	Changed Response	No Response
22	47	1	1

**Table F: Part 1, Question 7 – If “yes”, how many times?**

1 Time	2 Times	3 Times	4 Times	“Many” Times
17	1	1	2	1



**Table G: Reasons for Failing FER Previously**

<b>Attendance</b>	<b>Grades</b>	<b>Attendance and Grades</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>No Response</b>
14	1	1	1	5

**Part 2: Current Class Performance**

Part 2 of the survey was intended to determine how students were progressing in the class, as well as to gain insight as to their goals for FER. The data regarding students' current progress in FER is presented in Table H. When they took the survey, students had earned on average 8.88 Speaking and Listening points and 34.71 Reading and Writing points, meaning they had completed 63% of the minimum work necessary to pass Speaking and Listening, and 58% necessary to pass Reading and Writing.

**Table H: FER points earned at point of taking the survey**

<b>Average S&amp;L Score</b>	<b>Average Progress Towards Passing S&amp;L</b>	<b>Blank or Unclear Responses</b>	<b>Average R&amp;W Score</b>	<b>Average Progress Towards Passing R&amp;W</b>	<b>Blank or Unclear Responses</b>
8.88 points	63%	28	34.71 points	58%	12

There are three important limitations to this set of data, however. One limitation is a lack of balance in the reported data. Namely, there were 12 blank or unclear responses for Reading and Writing progress, compared to 28 for Speaking and Listening. Second, a number of responses appeared to be written on the surveys by another party. In these cases, the number of points appeared to be written in a different hand, and often with a different writing implement. On some surveys, a number was written in over a question mark or a similar marking. It therefore seems that at least one FER instructor “helped” their students on this particular item by filling in points. Thankfully, that instructor didn’t

appear to have added information to any other questions on the survey beyond the first two questions of Part 2. Still, this renders the data for these two questions unreliable, and seems to indicate that students did not have a clear concept of their progress in FER.

Third, being averages, these numbers do not represent the progress of any given individual student. Indeed some students had made far more progress in one component than the other at the time of the survey. Still, we can gather from this data that students do not seem to universally avoid one particular half of the course. This is only a tentative conclusion, however, and so further data collection in the future would be ideal.

Data related to students' goals for FER are found in Tables I and J. Here we see on the one hand that most students hoped or expected to earn more than the minimum passing grade of 'C'. On the other hand, most students reported that they expected to finish their coursework relatively late in the semester – in December or January. This may partially be explained by the fact that surveys were distributed throughout the semester, so a student taking the survey later would naturally expect to finish later as well. Moreover, if students hoped for a higher grade, that would require extra work. Students could therefore plan on finishing in, say, January, but have completed the minimum requirements for passing earlier.

**Table I: Part 2, Question 3 – When do you expect to finish your work for FER this semester?**

November	December	January	No Response
4	33	32	2

**Table J: Part 2, Question 4 – Which grade do you hope to receive?**

S	A	A or B	B	B or C	C	Other/ Unclear	No Response
9	15	2	24	2	14	3	2

### **Part 3: Feelings about the Listening and Speaking Component of FER**

Part 3 consisted entirely of Likert-scale questions. Table K contains each question along with its mean response and variance. The mean shows the average score for a given question, while the variance indicates how much the scores varied. On the scale, a score of four was neutral. Scores below 4 indicated disagreement, and scores above 4 indicated agreement. Details regarding response rate are also included.

Two of the participants mistakenly received copies of the survey that contained an extra page. This sorting error led the affected students to complete Part 3, Question 3 through Part 4, Question 4 twice. In instances where the two answers for a single question matched, that response was figured into overall calculations. When the responses were different, that question was not counted for that particular student. In addition to these cases, there were a few other instances of unclear answers. Again, these were not included in the calculations of mean and variance. For virtually every question where this problem arose, removing one or two scores from the set did not affect the mean or variance significantly, and so I felt that this was the best way to proceed.

**Table K: Responses to Part 3 of the survey**

<b>Question</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Variance</b>	<b>Valid Responses</b>	<b>Invalid Responses</b>	<b>No Response</b>
<b>1: “I enjoy watching movies for FER.”</b>	4.83	1.77	70	0	1
<b>2: “I enjoy talking about movies in FER.”</b>	4.84	1.64	70	0	1
<b>3: “The Listening and Speaking work is easy to do.”</b>	3.30	2.04	70	1	0
<b>4: “My English listening skills have improved because of FER.”</b>	4.32	1.09	69	2	0
<b>5: “My English speaking skills have improved because of FER.”</b>	4.82	1.64	70	1	0
<b>6: “It is important for me to improve my English listening and speaking skills.”</b>	5.57	1.48	70	1	0

Questions in Part 3 were designed to elicit students’ attitudes towards the Speaking and Listening course in general. The scales in the survey go from 1 to 7, with 1 representing strong disagreement with the prompt, 7 strong agreement, and 4 neutral feelings. Mean results for most questions fell within one point of 4, suggesting that students had neutral feelings towards the course overall. A notable exception to this within Part 3 is Question 6: “It is important for me to improve my English listening and speaking skills.” This particular question had one of the highest mean responses of all the

survey questions, and the low variance of 1.48 indicates that student responses were relatively consistent.

Another question that stands out within Part 3 is Question 3, “The Listening and Speaking work is easy to do.” This is the only question within Part 3 to which students expressed disagreement overall. What is more, while the mean score for this question only indicates mild disagreement, the variance is the highest among this set, suggesting that student’s responses ranged more widely than for other questions in Part 3. This finding seems to indicate that students have mixed opinions about the difficulty of the coursework, but that as a whole they do not find it to be especially easy. This supports Hull’s (2012, p. 26) suggestion that students generally do not think of FER as an “easy” class.

The remaining questions in this part of the survey all have mean scores between 4.32 and 4.82, and variances ranging from 1.09 to 1.77. This suggests that while individual students may feel strongly about the content of FER, the majority of students in the sample group had mild or neutral feelings about the course tasks and outcomes. We will now turn from students’ overall impressions of FER to their perceptions of the logistics of the course.

#### **Part 4: Schedule of classes**

Parts 4 and 5 of the survey were designed to gauge student feelings on course logistics and organization. Part 4 deals specifically with the scheduling of classes, while Part 5 focuses on the course orientation and related materials. Responses to Likert-scale items in Part 4 can be found in Table L. Students were also asked in Part 4, Question 2 a selected response question about whether their teacher had scheduled specific days and/or times for them to attend the Speaking and Listening class. Results for this question can be found in Table M.

**Table L: Responses to Part 4, Questions 1 and 3-7**

<b>Question</b>	<b>Valid Responses</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Variance</b>	<b>Invalid Responses</b>	<b>No Response</b>
<b>1: “It was easy to understand where and when my FER class would take place.”</b>	70	5.34	1.87	0	1
<b>3: “If my teacher gave me appointments, the schedule was easy to understand.”</b>	69	5.16	1.99	0	2
<b>4: “If my teacher gave me appointments, I attended class on all of my scheduled days.”</b>	68	3.85	2.07	1	2
<b>5: “If my teacher gave me appointments and I missed one, there were clear consequences.”</b>	69	3.93	2.33	0	2
<b>6: “I am more likely to come to class regularly if the teacher gives me appointments.”</b>	70	4.2	2.77	0	1
<b>7: “I prefer to choose the days that I come to class.”</b>	70	4.41	2.51	0	1

**Table M: Part 4, Question 2 – My listening and speaking teacher gave me a schedule of specific days and/or times for the movie discussions.**

Yes	No	Unclear	No response
56	7	1	7

When we examine this data, we first of all notice that the majority of teachers did seem to assign specific schedules to their Speaking and Listening students during the Fall 2013 semester. Moreover, students appeared able to understand those schedules reasonably well. Few students expressed disagreement to Question 1, and the average score was well above 4. In addition, students in each class were largely in agreement as to whether they had received a specific schedule. The main exception was Teacher X, of whose students 5 claimed to have received a schedule, 4 claimed not to have, and 2 left the question blank.

Students also responded positively regarding their knowledge of the time and location of their FER classes in general. It seems, then, that if students delayed coming to class, it was most likely not because they misunderstood the schedule. That said, only students who managed to come to class took the survey, so it would be helpful to know whether those students who did not attend felt the same way.

In contrast, students slightly disagreed with the statement about whether they had come to their assigned appointments. This suggests that the schedules that teachers created for their individual students have mixed success. Similarly, responses regarding the presence of clear consequences for missing an appointment were very slightly negative, but with a relatively large variance. Some of this variance may be due differences in teacher policies and attitudes towards the course. A breakdown of Questions 4 and 5 by teacher can be found in Table N. Here we can see that student perceptions of the strictness of the schedule do indeed vary in some cases. While students' reactions to most teachers averages out to be neutral, students of Teacher V were much more likely to agree that there would be consequences to missing class. In Teacher Y's class, on the other hand, consequences were less clear. At the same time, stricter consequences did not necessarily translate to higher attendance by survey

respondents. With the exception of Teacher U, every teacher's students responded to Question 4 neutrally on average. Although Teacher U seems to have much lower attendance than the rest, only 3 of that teacher's students took the survey, meaning that results for that subgroup could easily be skewed.

**Table N: Responses to Part 4, Questions 4 and 5, Broken Down by Teacher.**

Teacher	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
<b>Question 4 Mean</b>	4	4	5.13	4.09	3.5	2.9	3.83
<b>Question 5 Mean</b>	3.83	1.67	3.75	3.8	4.27	4.1	4.08

From this data we cannot make any conclusions about the effectiveness of one scheduling style or another, though these results do suggest that students understood the scheduling of FER Speaking and Listening overall. Except in one case, students were relatively consistent regarding their recollection of having received a schedule, and reported that they knew of the time and location of the class. Further research into specific organization styles or into the impressions of those students who did not come to class would probably provide deeper insights. However, such investigations fall outside the scope of this report, which seeks to learn students' general impressions.

### **Part 5: Listening and Speaking Orientation**

Part 5 of the survey dealt with the orientation to the Speaking and Listening component of FER. During the orientation, the teacher explains how to earn points as well as how to complete the tasks. The teacher also typically provides supporting documents to the students and, sometimes, distributes a conversation schedule. Critical aspects of the orientation include the language used by the teacher, the clarity of information given, and the quality and usefulness of course handouts. Table O details which languages the instructors spoke during orientation. Table R specifies which



documents students remember receiving during their orientations. Responses to remaining questions can be found in Table Q.

I chose to ask about the language of instruction in part because there was some concern among the CELE faculty that perhaps students were misunderstanding instructions and important information given in their L2. There was no debate about changing the language of instruction – FER is an English course led by native-speaking teachers, so English would remain the primary mode of communication. Some faculty thought, however, that having some or all of the orientation in Japanese might aid students in understanding the logistics in the course and therefore lead to better student performance.

Student responses to Part 5 Question 1 confirm that English is currently the primary language used in the orientation, though some faculty members may use some Japanese as they are able or see fit. To see whether the language of the orientation affected students' comprehension of the information, the results of Part 5, Questions 1 and 2 were broken down by teacher. Here we see that two teachers used only English, while the others, at least according to the students, used Japanese to some extent. If English language instruction led students to understand the orientation less, one would expect students of the English-only instructors to report a lower level of comprehension of their teachers' speech. In other words, the mean score for Question 2 should be well below four for the English-only instructors. Instead, the English-only instructors lie in the middle of the group. In fact, the mean score was in the neutral range for most teachers for this question. It appears, then, that students' comprehension of the orientation does not hinge solely on language.

**Table O: Part 5, Question 1 – Which language did your teacher use during the Listening and Speaking orientation?**

English	Japanese	Mixed English and Japanese	No response
54	0	16	1

**Table P: Part 5, Questions 1 and 2 by Teacher**

<b>Teacher</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>U</b>	<b>V</b>	<b>W</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>Z</b>
<b>Language</b>	E = 5, M = 1	E = 2, M = 1	E = 6, M = 2	E = 10, M = 1	E = 11	E = 8, M = 2	E = 6, M = 6
<b>Question 2 Mean</b>	3.5	6.67	5	4.45	4.54	5.4	3.83

This is further supported by the results for Questions 3 and 4. Question 3 asked whether students knew how to pass the course after they completed the orientation. Question 4 asked whether they knew how to complete the worksheets. As we see in Table Q, the mean response for both questions was above 5. This is relatively high, indicating that students did feel like they understood the course procedures and materials after the orientation. Question 5, about whether students were told about English Hour, also received a somewhat high mean score of almost 5. When asked whether they planned to attend English hour, however, students generally responded negatively. Over and over again, we see that students have an overall positive impression of their knowledge of the course.

**Table Q: Part 5, Other Questions**

<b>Question</b>	<b>Valid Responses</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Variance</b>	<b>Invalid Responses</b>	<b>No Response</b>
<b>2: “I understood everything my teacher said during the orientation.”</b>	70	4.59	2.77	0	1
<b>3: “After the orientation, I knew exactly how to do the movie worksheets.”</b>	70	5.21	2.26	0	1
<b>4: “After the orientation, I knew exactly how to get a passing grade.”</b>	69	5.33	2.05	1	1
<b>5: “During the orientation, my teacher clearly explained what English Hour is.”</b>	70	4.97	1.59	0	1
<b>6: “I intend to earn points by going to English Hour.”</b>	71	2.93	2.49	0	0
<b>8: “I clearly understand document A.”</b>	60	5.08	2.18	2	9
<b>9: “Document A is helpful for me.”</b>	61	4.84	2.01	1	9
<b>10: “I clearly understand document B.”</b>	59	4.97	2.14	2	10
<b>11: “Document B is helpful for me.”</b>	58	4.91	2.36	0	13
<b>12: “I clearly understand document C.”</b>	60	5.25	2.22	1	10

<b>13: “Document C is helpful for me.”</b>	61	5.18	2.12	0	10
<b>14: “I referred to the course documents after the orientation.”</b>	66	4.67	2.19	0	5
<b>15: “I would prefer to receive more documents during the orientation.”</b>	69	4.52	2.16	0	2
<b>16: “I would prefer to receive fewer documents during the orientation.”</b>	69	4.36	2.15	0	2
<b>17: “I would prefer to receive different documents during the orientation.”</b>	68	3.49	1.33	1	2
<b>18: “An orientation in English is sufficient for me.”</b>	68	4.72	1.93	1	2
<b>19: “I would be more likely to complete my FER coursework if the orientation were in Japanese.”</b>	69	3.87	2.94	0	2

In addition to the orientation session, students receive information about the course via handouts. Prior to the Fall 2013 semester, two different documents were widely used by teachers to explain the FER Speaking and Listening requirements. The first was a description of the two activities by which students could earn points in the course – Movie Discussion Time and English Hour. This document was referred to as document A in the survey. The second featured a simple chart reiterating the points earned for the two activities, as well as two flow charts to demonstrate how students could accumulate enough points to pass. This document was referred to as document B. The third document, labeled document C, represented an attempt on the part of the

faculty to consolidate the information from documents A and B into a simple summary and set of reminders. All three documents are written in English on one side and Japanese on the other. All three were attached to the end of the survey for participants' reference. See Appendices A, B, and C at the end of this paper for the English versions of these documents.

**Table R: Part 5, Question 7 – Which document(s) did you receive from your teacher?**

A	B	C	A and B	A and C	A, B and C	Unclear	No Response
5	6	6	4	1	26	2	21

Unfortunately, the creation of the document C did not clear up all confusion among the faculty. Namely, at least one felt that document C would replace the old summary documents, while others felt that it was meant to supplement them. In the end, instructors could choose which documents to distribute to students. Consequently, 26 students reported receiving all three documents, 5 identified two, and 17 claimed to only have received one. Of the students who only received one, 5 reported receiving document A, 6 document B, and 6 document C. In addition, there were 2 responses where the participants' intended selections were unclear, and 21 non-responses. Interestingly, follow-up questions regarding the three documents (Questions 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13) also had relatively low response rates. Whether this was due to students' confusion, lack of awareness of the materials, or disinterest is unclear.

Questions 8 through 13 merit further inspection as these give more information about students' perceptions of each document. For each document, students were first asked whether they could understand it, and then whether it was useful. Interestingly, the mean scores for these six questions were very similar. Although the values were slightly higher for document C, the difference was not great. Students therefore don't seem to indicate a strong preference when it comes to supporting documents.

Students also showed some ambivalence in Questions 14 through 16. Question 14 regarded whether students actually used the documents again after the orientation.

Questions 15 and 16 asked whether they would prefer a different number of documents. Means for all three questions were close to 4, suggesting an overall neutral posture. When asked whether they would like different documents, students' attitudes shifted a bit. The mean value of their responses was still close to 4, but this time it was slightly negative. As a whole, then, students seemed to show a lack of enthusiasm to any changes in the documents.

Questions 18 and 19 returned to the topic of language. When asked whether an English language orientation was sufficient, students responded near neutrally. When asked whether an orientation in Japanese would help, the mean response was again close to neutral, but slightly more negative. The variance to Question 19 was exceptionally high, however, suggesting that students' opinions on the issue varied relatively widely.

### **Part 5, Question 20 – Student Comments**

In the final question of the survey, students were invited to write any comments that they might have. Most students left this question blank, or simply wrote “nothing”. One student said that he or she couldn't express their thoughts and was frustrated. Another requested that the teachers all do the course the same way. Most surprisingly, however, was that the remaining comments were overwhelmingly positive. Two students even expressed a preference for FER over FE because they could have more English conversations in FER than in FE. Working with a sometimes demotivated student population can be frustrating for the teacher, and at times it may seem that students don't really care. These comments serve as good reminders that some do.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Although the results of the survey are interesting, there are a number of limitations to keep in mind. First, the anonymity of responses meant that I could not follow up with participants. This limited the depth of responses, and in some cases meant that confusing responses could not be clarified. Second, participants were recruited from the FER classes themselves. Students who did not come to class at all were thus excluded from the survey. This population would have been particularly helpful to hear from, as they represent a large portion of the students who ultimately fail the class, and whom reforms to the administration of the course could help. Third, because participation was

voluntary, respondents to the survey were likely to be more motivated students than those who chose not to take the survey. Overall responses to many of the questions could therefore be skewed. Fourth, a number of surveys were incompletely filled out, which does cast some doubt on the trustworthiness of the responses on those surveys.

The first and fourth limitations could be addressed in future studies by revisiting the research questions again, but using a different method to obtain student opinions. Oral interviews, for example, would allow for more extended responses and perhaps eliminate the gaps created by unanswered survey responses. The researcher could also assist students who didn't understand the meaning or intent of a particular question, or who couldn't recall specific information about their class performance. The second and third limitations, however, are a hazard of the course itself. Again, FER differs from most language classes in that students are only required to come to enough sessions to complete the required work.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this survey was to assess the perceptions that students held of the Listening and Speaking component of FER. Various CELE faculty have expressed frustration with FER in the past, but there was little data to show whether students felt negatively about the course. The hope was that this survey would provide some insight as to how students felt about the course as a whole as well as the logistics of the course.

I found that students exhibited neutral feelings on average for most statements about FER. Some statements did elicit stronger feelings on a few items, notably the importance of Listening and Speaking skills, and a lack of intention to attend English Hour for credit. I also noted wider variation among student responses to statements regarding the perceived consequences of missing scheduled class times, the likeliness of students completing their work more quickly were the course explained in Japanese, and the likelihood that students would attend class were the teacher to assign them specific appointments. In addition, a number of students expressed appreciation for the teachers and the FER course, while another stated his or her wish for more consistency among the teachers. From these results we can glean a few conclusions and recommendations.

First, although FER students are aware of English Hour, most expressed a neutral attitude towards the activity, or else indicated directly that they did not plan to take part

in it. This is consistent with current FER student participation in English Hour. Although there is little documentation of FER students' attendance in English Hour, anecdotal evidence indicates that few if any FER students attend for credit during any given semester. The CELE faculty may therefore want to reconsider whether to offer credit for English Hour at all. Eliminating this option would simplify both FER and English Hour, and would have little to no negative impact on either program.

Second, it seems that FER students are aware of when they should attend class, but receive mixed messages about the consequences of missing their appointments. The reality is that many students, especially those in their 4<sup>th</sup> year who cannot graduate if they do not pass the class, are accommodated in the end. It might be well worth the while of CELE faculty to come up with an organized system for discouraging procrastination and then presenting a united front by enforcing attendance schedules in a consistent way.

Third, students seemed to slightly prefer the newest orientation document. Since this document contains most of the same information as the previous two documents, it could save paper, confusion, and frustration by simply distributing only one handout, and eliminating the previous two from circulation. That said, students' attitudes towards all course documents appear to be ambivalent, and the course expectations appear to be clearly communicated as it is, so this is not a particularly urgent issue. Students also seem to have mixed reactions towards having orientation in Japanese, so it does not seem worth the effort to create any additional Japanese materials for the moment.

Finally, to end on a positive note, we will return to the other major concern of FER teachers, namely that the course generally fails to fulfill the objectives of FE, and the time and effort spent on FER does little to benefit students. The survey results do seem to indicate that some students do in fact enjoy the course and benefit from it. Some even went as far as to say that some of the aspects of FER should be more present in FE. Instructors can therefore take heart that not all of their time and efforts are in vain. In addition, they might take a cue from the students and consider how they might increase the amount of conversation time they have with their FE students.

Although the results of this survey were at times limited and inconclusive, they do nonetheless provide some much needed insight into the FER program. Given the current lack of literature on the program, I would like to encourage other CELE instructors to



revisit the research questions explored in this survey. Follow-up studies featuring more qualitative methods, such as open-response surveys or student interviews could provide more in-depth information about what students actually feel about the program. As the curriculum exists ultimately to benefit our students, we would be wise to listen to their perspectives on such matters.

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## Appendix A

### FER Activities Description Handout (Document A in the Survey)

#### FER Activities Description

##### What is Movie Discussion Time?



Movie Discussion Time is when you meet with your Listening/Speaking teacher one on one and talk about an English movie you've seen. You can watch any English movie (at home, in the library or at the movie theater). Next, you answer the questions on your Movie Discussion Worksheet. After that, you bring your worksheet to your assigned class time and talk about your movie in English for about 5 or 6 minutes. Remember, you have seven assigned time slots to see your teacher each semester to talk about movies. **Movie Discussion Time is worth 2 points and is required.**

##### What is English Hour?





English Hour is at four different times during the week for one hour with a different teacher each time. English Hour gives you a chance to practice and improve your English speaking skills. **This class is worth 1 point and is not required.**

## Appendix B

### FER Schematic Handout (Document B in the Survey)

## Completing Your FER Course Requirement

Students can choose from the following two activities to complete their FER course requirement.

ACTIVITY	REQUIRED?	Points
(A) MOVIE DISCUSSION WORKSHEET 	YES	2
(B) ENGLISH HOUR 	NO	1

Since students are required to complete 14 points to achieve a passing grade (C) in FER, this requirement can be satisfied by coming to each of the 7 assigned meeting times to discuss movie discussion worksheets.

For example:

$$\begin{array}{c} 7 \text{ meetings} \times 2 \text{ points} = 14 \text{ points} \\ \downarrow \\ 14 \text{ points} = \text{C (passing grade)} \end{array}$$

Only Movie Discussion Worksheets are required in this class. Some students may want to achieve a higher grade (A, A, B) and have the option of getting additional credit hours by going to English Hour.

For example:

$$\begin{array}{c} 7 \text{ meetings} \times 2 \text{ points} = 14 \text{ points} \\ \downarrow \\ 14 \text{ points} = \text{C (passing grade)} \\ + \\ 2 \text{ English hours (2 points)} = \\ \downarrow \\ 16 \text{ points} = \text{B} \end{array}$$

## Appendix C

### New FER Handout (Document C in the Survey)

#### **Freshman English for Repeaters (FER) Speaking / Listening Summary**

1. To pass with a “C”, you must get at total of **14 points**.
2. If you want a higher grade, you can earn more points.  
(16 points = B, 18 points = A, 20 points = S)
3. To earn **2 points**, you must do the following:
  - a. Watch an English language movie (at home or library).
  - b. Complete the answers on the **Movie Discussion Worksheet**.
  - c. Bring your complete Movie Discussion Worksheet to class.
  - d. Meet with your teacher and talk about movie for 5 or 6 minutes.
4. You can earn extra points by completing more Movie Discussion Worksheets or by going to **English Hour**.
  - English Hour meets several different times a week with different teachers and different topics. Going to English Hour will earn 1 point and is not required.

#### **Things to Remember...**

- To pass FER, you must **PASS** the **Speaking /Listening class AND Reading/Writing class**.
- To earn your 14 points for your Speaking/Listening class, you must watch **7 movies**, complete **7 Movie Discussion Worksheets**, and meet with your teacher **7 times**.
- **DO NOT wait** until the last month or last week to try to earn your points. You will (probably) NOT pass FER. ☹